

MODERNISM IN THE PAÍS VALENCIÀ

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TRINIDAD SIMÓ ART CRITIC



In the *País Valencià*, Modernism flourished over a short period of time, during which it had as its setting the cities — Valencia, Castelló, Alcoi — and surrounding areas, and was particularly common in buildings that were used as second homes by people who lived in the urban areas.

An eminently urban and bourgeois phenomenon, generally speaking progressive in nature, Modernism was just one aspect of a much more widespread aesthetic movement. However, in the *País Valencià* it developed mainly in architecture, in some industries (to a certain extent in furniture, in a fair amount of ceramics, also in ironwork), and also, discreetly, in poster design and illustrations. But on the whole it developed as a fundamentally architectural fashion.

I use the word fashion quite deliberately, though not in any disparaging sense. The word is used to draw a distinction, to understand the limits of a movement that failed to become generalized in the field of industry and was never quite understood by society. Some architects accepted it and only certain clients were enthusiastic enough to subscribe to "its modernity". It always had its limitations: it



was modest in its renovation of design, dubitative in its creative demands, always allied to an eclectic spirit, limited in its social acceptance, restricted in its application... and, at the same time, important. Important because of its surprising proliferation at a time when Valencia was growing rapidly, allowing it to spread throughout the bourgeois districts, a large part of the 1879 *Eixample*, the most privileged part, and certain development areas within the old part of the city.

It was also significant for the quality of

some of its works, such as the *Estació del Nord* (by Demetrio Ribes, 1906), the Ferrer apartment block (by Vicente Ferrer, 1908), the central market (by the Catalans Guardia Vial and Soler i March, 1910) and, to a lesser extent perhaps but equally unique, the *Mercat de Colom* (by Francisco Mora, 1910).

Its language followed the general lines of Catalan architectural Modernism. In fact, the main source was the Barcelona school of Architecture, where most of the architects of the Valencia Modernist generation had studied. But the direct influence of certain architects also left its mark; Domènech i Montaner, especially in those buildings that combined Modernism and historicism; Sagnier, in buildings full of elegant, flowing plant designs, and, strangely enough, Gaudí. Gaudí's influence, not too important in the city, except for the *Mercat de Colom*, had ingenuous later echos in the *Santuari de la Magdalena*, in the province of Alicante*, in Novelda (by the engineer José Sala Sala, 1916).

Catalonia was not only a training centre but also a brother country, a neighbour open to Europe, with which a special alli-

* In Catalan, Alacant.



with popular and unpretentious local connotations. This can be seen in any of the buildings mentioned above, but especially in those designed for public use, as for example the *Estació del Nord* and the markets. The art of nineteenth century Valencian painters such as Bernard Ferrandis, Fillol, C. Gómez or Agravot, whose style depicted regional society and life and had been established since the sixties, must have weighed heavily in this "collective imagination" with its references to the land, the city and the people themselves. And a special boost must have come around 1900 from the works of two artists, Blasco Ibáñez and Sorolla, the first with his novels on Valencian subjects, rooted in reality — *Arroz y Tartana*, *Entre naranjos* or *Cañas y Barro* —, and the second with his passionate, colourful paintings of the Valencian beaches, the fishermen and children.

However, this popular aspect, in which the renovatory Modernist impulse, with its European inheritance, combined with the demands of local taste and traditional craftsman's techniques, never obscured Modernism's eminently bourgeois character. Modernism was created by the bourgeoisie and became established in the bourgeois city.

At that particular moment, the turn of 1900, in the confluence of important technical breakthroughs in building, the crisis of academic languages and the beginning of modernity, the restructuring of the architectural profession, far-reaching city renovations and reforms, a new relationship with the city was also born, in which appeared the temptation of land for developing and building for investment, with its increasing profitability. At the same time, and alongside all this, new aesthetic ideals were defined, amongst which was to be found the new role of architecture, which was to contribute both to the definition of the home — the bourgeois home —, with all the attributes of patrimonial property and of the unmistakable and irrepeatable beloved family seat, and to the definition of the new city that was growing up firmly established in its territory.

And it was at this point that architecture acquired a new dimension. In its attempts to contribute to the shaping of city and home, it took on a more active role, in which persuasion and incitement adopted an important intentionality. We find ourselves before architecture as image, the architecture that represents something, architecture as a symbol.



ance was maintained, something that was understood without having to be put into words, something that came from their shared history, the language and the geographical similarities.

Two main trends predominated: the one that came from the French Art Nouveau, with a profusion of plant themes whose treatment fell somewhere between naturalism and symbolism, and the sinuous lines of the classic *coup de fouet*; and the one from the Viennese *Sezession*, with its more geometrical design and its abstract motifs. In fact, these two trends, each interwoven with certain local and traditional themes and both tinged with the eclecticism that had been the predominant characteristic of the Valencian architecture of the end of the nineteenth century, eventually resulted in a particular style, whose far from radical Modernism was possibly more flexible than original.

Also, the relatively common use of ceramics for façades and interiors, especially in covering the bottoms of walls — a centuries old tradition — and the use of an illustrative style which, without any kind of symbolism, ambiguity or subtlety, depicted certain aspects of the Valencia of 1900, especially those connected with its agriculture or the happiness of its men and women, provided Valencian Modernism

But it was not only Valencia that embraced Modernism. Other cities did, too, though here its reception was directly related to the economic and other links that they had with the capital. Thus we find important examples of Modernism in Alcoi, whose setting and aesthetics show similar characteristics to those of Valencia. We also come across it in the city of Castelló and in smaller towns which at that time underwent considerable growth thanks to the orange trade; Burriana and Onda are two curious enclaves of this type.

For fifteen years, from 1900 to 1915, Modernism manifested itself in bourgeois private architecture, in the homes of the middle class and in the occasional public building, where it achieved a remarkable quality; but in spite of these successes, history itself points out the limits of its acceptance. The new City Hall (designed in 1905 by F. Mora and C. Carbonell) returned once more to Classicism for its inspiration, and the regional and national exhibitions of 1909 and 1910 escaped towards an architecture that was related to the Second French Empire and the *art pompier*.

In fact, by 1915, few architects were constructing Modernist buildings, and in 1920 the language belonged to the past. Having failed to create a school, it was no more than an episode. ●